The Sun.

BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

TWELVE PAGES | NEW YORK, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1919. | SECTION FIVE

Hugh Walpole in Petrograd

With Its Background of the Overthrow of Autocracy, "The Secret City" Firmly Enthrones a Young Author

WE can't help thinking of Hugh Walpole as a young man, not because he isn't so old in years but because he is so young in achievement. Facing the title page of his new novel, *The Secret City*, the reader finds a list of ten volumes of fiction. Mr. Walpole might fairly be called an old hand at writing, therefore. But it is only within the last half dozen years that he has done his distinguished work. And it is only with *The Secret City*, we declare, that he has shown what work he can do.

For there can be no doubt about it; this is a noteworthy book, a beautifully written book and—what is best of all—a book with a backbone. You may like it or you may not; you will be unable, we believe, to withhold admiration. That any one, except possibly Joseph Conrad, should have written such a novel in English is hard to believe. Of course, if the book had come out anonymously, we might hesitate to attribute it to Conrad because the story is not told as he would almost certainly have told it, the order of the telling differs, the choices of words are different, the action, both inner and outer, is less explicit than he would have made it. But while we were hesitating we would all be asking: "Well, if Conrad didn't write it, who did? Who else *could?*" And there would be no answer.

Inasmuch as the story is one which will dissatisfy many readers, and puzzle others, while delighting thousands more and exciting (on all sides) contention and praise—inasmuch as it is a star shell and not a searchlight, we shall endeavor to describe it so carefully that every one, coming to it, will come to it with the right sort of expectations. Then sing, Goddess, the wrath of Alexei Petrovitch, which brought woes and disasters innumerable upon the Markovitches, packed sardinely in a Petrograd flat in the months of December, 1916, and January-May, 1917, at the time when God decided he would not bother any longer to save our Little Father, the Czar.

The beauty of *The Secret City*, we said, is its possession of a backbone. That backbone is external action, very slight, long deferred, slow in culminating, coming with a crash at the close. Logical, too, once you grant the premises. And the chief premise is this: That a sensualist, terribly thwarted in what promises to be an ennobling love—thwarted by the death of the woman he loves—may so desire death in order to follow her beyond the grave as deliberately to provoke a man to murder him.

A Double Satisfaction.

Why not suicide? Too proud for that. Then why torture the other man to murder him? Well, aside from achieving his main purpose, which is his own death, our sensualist has the exquisite pleasure of torturing that other man. Eh?

Incredible? Not half as incredible as Dostoievsky's *Crime and Punishment*, not half! Unpleasant? Doubtless. Very Russian? Truly! Untrue? Ah, not even Mr. Walpole will avouch its truthfulness; it is, simply, how it looked to a rather acutely observant Englishman who happened to be on the spot. Mr. Walpole is that Englishman, in the guise of one John Durward who tells the story, starting with a disclaimer as ample as such a thing could be. "Of Russia and the Russians I know nothing, but of the effect upon myself and my ideas of life that Russia and the Russians have made during these last three years I know something." Well, then, if you want to, listen . . .

The Incredible City.

What is the secret city of the title? Petrograd? Yes, partly. But much more is it the citadel of the Russian proverb which recites: "In each man's heart there is a secret town at whose altars the true prayers are offered!" And so what we have in this book before us is first (and always foremost) the story of several lives. Petrograd itself, with its insane atmosphere on the eve of the Revolution, is painted for us persistently, with many patient and wonderful brush strokes. The Revolution, or the first weeks of it, are narrated for us with an eyewitness's veracity and an eyewitness's incompleteness. But Petrograd and the Revolution . . . all that . . . are put before us only so far as they enter into the lives of a few people—a family of Russians and three casual Englishmen. Which is as it should be. Petrograds change, revolutions come and go; but the secret city of the human heart is not transformed. Human motives remain. Human passions ebb and flow. Human hopes perish—and are reborn.

The people of Mr. Walpole's novel are completely realized. They are as much alive as if they moved in the flesh before you. The reader may be baffled by them—many a reader will be, though to most readers they will be comprehensible before the closing chapters. But baffling or not, there is no disbelieving in them. Two of the most important—Alexei Petrovitch Semyonov and John Durward, the narrator—are characters in Mr. Walpole's earlier novel, *The Dark Forest*. It is not absolutely necessary that before reading *The Secret City* you should read *The Dark Forest*, but it is much to be desired that you do so. Otherwise you will be unable to fathom Alexei Petrovitch (the overshadowing character) as adequately as you ought to from his first entrance.

But about the others, the others besides the sinister Alexei Petrovitch. Take poor old Markovitch, for example. It's not easy, of course, to see him as anything but a self-befooled, ridiculous figure until you grasp that he had three ideals to live up to. The first was his wife, Vera; then there were his hopeless inventions; lastly, there was Russia. Came a time when, as young Bohun, one of the Englishmen, put it: "He'd lost Russia, he was losing Vera, and he wasn't very sure about his inventions." At the last he clung to Russia, hopefully. This revolution meant something wonderful for her—and for the whole world! Then, with his firm white hand stroking his honey colored beard, Alexei Petrovitch would smile and say to his brother-in-law: "Well, now, Nicolai Leontievitch, what do you think now of your fine Revolution? . . . Too optimistic, weren't you?"

Take Vera, beautiful and with immortal pride; with a great and candid courage, too. She had her sister, the girlish Nina, she had her husband. What was this tragedy of love that came to her and destroyed everything? Nina, tempestuous, lovable, like a child—why in the name of all that is merciful should *she* have to suffer? Thank God! there was a happy ending here! Mr. Walpole is kinder to our sensibilities than was Mr. Hergesheimer in *Java Head*. He does not break his butterfly on the wheel, as little Sidsall Ammidon was broken.

Others—a half 'dozen or so—that we mustn't speak of singly. Even such minor characters as Uncle Ivan and Baron Wilderling are etched perfectly. We would say a few words about the background.

Mr. Walpole makes Petrograd as memorable a city as does Tolstoy his Moscow, with Napoleon gazing upon its rounded domes. And that is memorable indeed, as any one who ever read *War and Peace* will certify. An intensely colorful city, lighted by stars and bonfires, exhaling the stink of the swamp and Rasputin's corpse, coldly menaced by the frozen Neva River, a volcano of human destiny with its thick ice melting rapidly from the heat of terrible flames underneath. A city where a great slimy beast seems to appear apocalyptically from the sheeted waters of the canal. A city where always there stands silhouetted against the evening glow the immense figure of a black-bearded peasant, grave, controlled, thoughtful, watching. A city of dream—only the dream is true.

THE SECRET CITY. By Hugh Walpole. George H. Doran Company. $1.60.